What are the Psalms? - 2
A Book of Songs
Psalm 92
IV. The Psalms for All of Life

The churches in which I was reared, like those of most American Protestants, never once sang a psalm as part of their public worship. [1] Consequently, I had no awareness of psalm- singing as a feature of worship, or as part of any ecclesiastical tradition. However, while I was a freshman in college (1977-78) an event occurred during a student Bible study which made a lasting impression. Marshall Foster (1945-2022), the minister leading our Bible study, asked us to turn to Psalm 92, "a song for the Sabbath," according to the superscription which urges us to "give thanks" and "sing praises" with "resounding music" both "in the morning and by night" (vv1-2). "Praise, the business of the Sabbath, is here recommended," says Matthew Henry.[2] "Praise is Sabbatic work," agrees C. H. Spurgeon, "the joyful occupation of resting hearts." It is of interest to note that Spurgeon could say of the worship of his day (1890's) "no Psalm is more frequently sung upon the Lord's day than the present."[3] Back to our Bible study– Foster then led us in singing it to the tune "If I Were a Rich Man" from the musical "Fiddler on the Roof:"

[1]It is good to give thanks,
And sing praises to the name of the Lord O Most high;
[2]To declare Thy lovingkindness,
In the morning and by night
(*repeat*)
[3]And with the ten-stringed lute and with the harp;

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[1] Some of the following has been reworked from T. L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin*, and "Restoring Psalm Singing to our Worship," in Ryken *et al.* (eds.), *Give Praise to God*.
[2] Henry, *Exposition*, III:590.
[3] Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, IV:116.

With resounding music on the lyre.
[4]For Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by what Thou hast done, I will sing for joy at the works of Thy hands. [5]How great are thy works O Lord! Thy thoughts are very deep. (slightly adjusted NASV [1977])

It worked. In my teenage California Christian way, I thought that it was "neat." Psalms self-identify as songs. "A Psalm" (*mizmor*) by definition is "a song." It's called both in the superscription. The Psalms are labeled in the titles as "Psalms" 58 times and as "songs" 32 times. [4] Songs and singing to God are referred to 101 times in the Psalms (excluding the superscriptions).[5] [6] The Psalms were meant to be sung, and we were singing them—or, at least, one of them. What could make more sense? It was for me a self-authenticating experience. We should sing Psalms. Moreover, according to Psalm 92, the Lord's Day is meant to be a day in which we "give thanks" and "sing praises." Through song we are meant to "declare God's steadfast love in the morning" in morning

[4] The Psalms are identified by their superscriptions 59 times as psalms (*mizmor*), 32 times as songs (*siyr*); once as a *shiggaian* (a transliteration of the Hebrew) "which he sang" (*siyr*); six times as a *miktam* (a transliteration of the Hebrew, meaning uncertain), but which also is a song (eg. Pss 57:7, 9; 59:16-17); 13 times as a *maskil* (again, a transliteration of the Hebrew), and again is a song (eg. Ps 42:8; Ps 45 superscription; Ps 88 superscription; Ps 89:1).
[5] Joel R. Beeke in *Why We Should Sing Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), finds 180 references to *sing* and song in the Psalter.
[6] The people of God in the Psalms are either commanded to sing or described as singing 66 times (eg. Pss 5:11; 7:17; 9:2, 11; 13:6; 18:49; 21:13; 27:6; 30:4, 12; 33:3; 47:6, 7; 51:14; 57:7, 9; 59:16, 17; 61:8; 63:7; 66:2, 4; 68:4, 32; 71:25; 75:9; 81:1; 84:2; 89:1; 92:1, 2; 95:1; 96:1, 2; 98:1; 101:1; 104:33; 105:2; 43; 106:12; 108:1, 3; 119:22; 135:3; 148:1, 5; 145:7; 147:1, 7; 149:1, 5); Creation is called to sing or described as singing four times (eg. Pss 65:13; 96:12; 98:8; 104:12); the nations and all the earth are called to sing praises seven times (eg. Pss 66:4; 67:4; 96:1, 2; 98:4); another 24 times the psalmist refers to responding to God with songs (eg. Pss 28:7; 33:3; 40:3; 42:4, 8; 47:1; 68:4; 69:30; 77:6; 95:2; 96:1; 98:1, 4; 107:22; 118:14, 15; 119:54: 137:3, 4; 144:9; 147:1; 149:1); or with psalms (eg. Ps 47:7); a total of 101 times. Add to this 90 superscriptions labeling the text as a psalm or song for a total of 191 connections of the Psalms with singing.

worship, and His "faithfulness by night" in evening worship (vv1-2). This is by divine design. Supported by musical instruments (v3) or not, we sing of our glee at God's *character* ("steadfast love" and "faithfulness"), we "sing for joy" at the *works* of God's "hands" (v4). Our songs are full of God and rich in content. Sadly, that was the closest we came to singing a complete Psalm in my four years as an undergraduate.

A one-month internship in March of 1978 at St. David's Broomhouse Church in Edinburgh was a part of my program of study at Trinity College, Bristol, England. The first Sunday there I discovered that more psalms than just the 92nd had been put to music. The first 190 pages of the hymnal of the Church of Scotland consisted of nothing but psalms— all 150 rhymed and metered for singing. Frankly, I was startled. Where had these been hiding? Why did American churches not use them? It seemed odd to me. Why would Bible-believing Christians in America not care about singing the psalms? For me this was straightforward. God wrote the psalms. He wrote them to be sung. Therefore, we ought to sing them.

History

The Psalms occupy the middle of our Bibles and make up the longest book in the Bible. The Book of Psalms is our only canonical, Holy Spirit-inspired hymnbook. Yet singing of the psalms is mostly ignored even by those with high views of Scripture. The anecdotal evidence is that the typical worshipper is more likely to be struck by lightning on Sunday morning than to sing a psalm in church. What has been obvious to me for the last nearly 50 years, that psalms should be sung, is obvious to only the tiniest of remnants of even the most serious Christians.

Apostles

"From earliest times the Psalter has been both the hymn-book and the prayer book of the Christian Church," say Derek Kidner

and J. G. Thomson.[7] This was true from the beginning of the apostolic age. When Peter and John were threatened by the council in Jerusalem and released, they gathered with their fellow believers and reported what happened. They together sang two Psalms, Psalm 146 followed by Psalm 2. They specify of the latter what is true of all the Psalms, that God "by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David didst say" (Acts 4:25, NASB, 1977). The Psalms are the product of the work of the Holy Spirit.

"The psalms formed the core of the praises of the New Testament church," as Hughes Old has observed.[8] The apostle Paul directed both the Ephesian and Colossian churches to sing psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and commented on the Corinthian practice of doing so, though the ESV obscures it (1 Cor. 14:15, 26).[9] James instructed his readers ("the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad," apparently a way of referring to the whole church) to sing psalms (James 5:13, *psallō*). The spirituality or piety of the apostolic age is a singing piety centered in the Book of Psalms. The people of God are a singing people.

Church history

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[7] Derek Kidner and J. G. Thomson, "Book of Psalms," in J. D. Douglas, et. al., *The New Bible Dictionary*
(Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1962), 1059, cited in Beeke and Selvaggio, *Sing a New Song,* 42.

[8] Hughes O. Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 37.

[9] Although Paul uses the first person singular in 1 Cor 14:15 (*psallō*, translated "sing praises" in the ESV), he is laying down a general principle for what is to happen in the church. The Greek noun *psalmos* is used in the LXX and Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33 for the Book of Psalms, and in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 for singing psalms. This suggests that 1 Corinthians 14:15 and 14:26 likely refers specifically to singing psalms, the latter using the word *psalmos* not *hymneō* though translated "hymn" by the ESV: "each one has a hymn."

The church for centuries understood the primacy of the Psalms as the church's songs. Because heretical sects were skilled in writing hymns, early church councils forbade all extra-biblical songs, allowing only Psalms and biblical hymns (eg. The Magnificat) be sung (eg. Councils at Braga, 350 A.D.; Laodicea, 360 A.D.; Chalcedon, 451 A.D.). For over a thousand years the church sang only Psalms in its public worship.

Far from this restriction dampening the commitment to singing in the Patristic era, the church fathers could hardly contain their enthusiasm for the singing of the Psalms. We have collected elsewhere the effusive testimony of Patristic leaders such as Athanasius (c. 296-273), Eusebius (c. 260-240), Basil the Great (c. 330-379), Jerome (c. 343-420), the translator of the Old and New Testaments into Latin (the *Vulgate*), Chrysostom (c. 347-407), and the greatest of the Patristic theologians, Augustine (354-430), a veritable "who's who" of the early centuries of the church.[10] "From the earliest times the Christian community sang the psalms following the practice of the synagogue," says Mary Berry in the *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*.[11] During the Middle Ages the singing of psalms by congregations waned. Yet at the same time psalm-singing, if anything, was intensified by the medieval monastic orders, which chanted their way through the entire Psalter each week. Modern commentators agree: "Moreover from earliest times the Psalter has been both the hymn-book and the prayer book of the Christian Church."[12] The Reformation revived the *congregational* singing of *whole* Psalms. Psalm-singing thereby became a hallmark of Protestantism, especially of Reformed

[10] See *Worshipping with Calvin*, 127-129. See also collections of Patristic citations in John McNaughter, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (1907; Edmonton, Alberta: Still Water Revival Books, 1992); John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3-10.
[11] Mary Berry, "Psalmody," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 450.
[12] J. D. Douglas, et al. (eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1965), 1059.

Protestantism. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Anglicans were exclusively Psalm-singing for nearly 300 years.

John D. Witvliet (b. 1967), director of the Calvin Institute of Worship at Calvin College, points out that one of the distinguishing dynamics of Reformation-era psalm-singing was "the singing of whole or large portions of individual psalms rather than the versicles used in the medieval Mass."[13] The Reformers were not content with singing "versicles," or fragments of psalms, what we might call "Scripture songs." Nor were they content with the partial collections of psalms (65-80 psalm settings) as found in the Presbyterian hymnals of the last century (e.g. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* [1933], *The Hymnbook* [1955], *Trinity Hymnal* [1961, 1980], or with their compilers' "too prissy" (as Hughes Old calls it) editing of those which were included. They "went much too far in trying to clean up the treasury of David."[14] To sing the Psalms is to sing the Psalter. Each Psalm has its own thematic integrity. The Book of Psalms as a whole is characterized by theological, Christological, and experiential wholeness. The Psalter was given by the Holy Spirit as a complete collection of songs whose strength is collective: laments not isolated from praise, imprecations not isolated from confessions of sin, but all together. The whole gospel of the whole Christ is found in the whole Psalter.

Our point: the Psalms are not merely a collection of poems to be recited or texts to be read responsively. They are songs to be sung. "The psalms may be spoken," says liturgical scholar Paul Westermeyer, "but they cry out to be sung."[15] That in itself is worth pondering. "The psalms are poems," adds C. S. Lewis

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[13] John D. Witvliet, "The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin's Geneva," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 32, 1997, 296.
[14] Hughes O. Old, "The Psalms as Christian Prayer, A Preface to the Liturgical Use of the Psalter," unpublished manuscript, 1978, 18.
[15] Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 25.

(1898-1963), "and poems intended to be sung."[16] The implication of this is highlighted by Motyer: "The Psalms themselves reveal a religion overflowing in song."[17]

Why a songbook?

We may inquire further, why a book of songs? Why songs and not merely prose or poems? Several movies and television programs have featured remarkable cinematic moments enhanced by music. *Crimson Tide's* use of "Eternal Father, Strong to Save"; *The King's Speech* use of the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and the second movement of his Fifth Piano Concerto; and the movie *Love Affair's* use of children singing the Beatle's song "I Will" are among the most powerful cinematic scenes ever produced, and the music played no small part in making them such. The multi-part series *The Crown* features the tragedy of what is called a slag heap or mine dump that collapsed onto a schoolhouse in Aberfan, Wales, killing 116 schoolchildren and 28 adults. It movingly portrays the townspeople at the graveyard standing around the caskets, singing "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" to the tune Aberystwyth. These examples illustrate our first answer to the question, "Why a songbook?"

Power of music

These cinematic examples are reminders of the power of music and hints at why God would ordain its use for the good of His people. As the ancient Greek philosophers, the church fathers, the Reformers, and nearly all the philosophers and theologians prior to the 20th century have noted, music, for good or ill, engages the emotions and thereby insinuates the accompanying words and sentiments more deeply in the soul than otherwise would be the case.

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[16] C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1958), 2. "The psalms were written to be sung, not just read. To sing them is to honor God's intention in giving to us" (Lawrence C. Roff, *Let Us Sing* [Atlanta: Great Commission Publication, 1991], 65).

[17] Motyer, "The Psalms," 485.

Because of this characteristic, songs often play an important role as markers of identity. Nations sing national anthems, uniting citizens across political differences. Colleges have their alma maters and fight songs which bind students, graduates, and supporters together. Whole generations are sometimes defined by their music. Think of the "greatest generation" and swing music, the Boomers and the Beatles-era rock 'n' roll for example. The Ken Burns series *The Vietnam War* made powerful use of the latter for anyone who came of age in the 1960s and 70s. At the time of the Reformation, the French Huguenots and Scottish Presbyterians were identified as such by the singing of psalms.

Building upon the thought of Augustine, Calvin recognizes that music is a "gift of God" whose aim is "recreating man and giving him pleasure." Taking a cue from Plato (whom he cites), Calvin observes,

> There is scarcely in the world anything which is more capable of turning or moving morals this way and that, as Plato prudently considered it. And in fact we experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to arouse hearts in one way or another.[18]

Because of the "incredible power" music has "to arouse hearts," its use ought to be carefully considered. Calvin cites the precedent of the "ancient doctors of the Church" who denounced the "unseemly and obscene songs" to which their contemporaries were "addicted" as "mortal and Satanic poison for corrupting the world." One can imagine what he would say about today's popular music. He distinguishes words from tunes, arguing that when bad words are joined to appealing melodies, the song

[18] McKee, *John Calvin*, 56; cited from Calvin's "Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms," 95.

> … pierces the heart much more strongly and enters into it; just as through a funnel, wine is poured into a container, so also venom and corruption are distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody.[19]

The tune and its words "pierce the heart." A song "enters into… the depth of the heart *by the melody*." There is a difference between music providing the "language" for emotional expression and music manipulating the emotions. Songs have the capacity on the one hand to seduce, to corrupt, to break down one's moral will, and on the other hand to inspire, to fortify, to solidify one's determination to pursue righteousness and truth. Calvin's solution to the potential corrupt use of music was *not* that of Zwingli, who eliminated music altogether from the worship of Zurich. The potential contribution of music to the shaping of Christian devotion was too valuable to ignore. Rather, he argues for the "moderate" use of music lest it become the "occasion for our giving free reign to dissolution, or making ourselves effeminate in disordered heights," or "become the instrument of lasciviousness" and "shamelessness." He urged that care be taken both with respect to words and tunes. Regarding tunes, Calvin urges thoughtful consideration:

> Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but have gravity and majesty, as St. Augustine says. And thus, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain people at table and in their houses, and the psalms which are sung in the church in the presence of God and his angels.[20]

[19] Ibid., 96.
[20] Ibid., 94.

This distinction between what is sung by the people at home and what is sung at church lies behind the "sacred music" tradition.[21] Because what we do at church worshipping God is unlike anything else we do in life, worship requires a distinctive music suited to the solemnity of the activity. It is not the music of the world, nor should we expect it to be. It is not the music of a generation, or of my personal taste or preference, but the music of *the church*.

Efficacy of inspired words

The second reason for a canonical songbook is to provide the people of God with inspired words to sing (Acts 4:25). Respecting the words, Calvin, who again proves insightful, as he rightly, even obviously maintains, that none better can be found than those which the Holy Spirit Himself has given to us in the Book of Psalms. Again, he cites Augustine:

> Now what St. Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from Him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere, and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose, than the psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory.[22]

The words of the Psalms partake of all the edifying qualities of Scripture. Does the word of God have regenerating power (1 Pt 1:22-25)? So do the Psalms. Does the word of God have sanctifying power (Jn 17:17)? So do the Psalms. Is the word of

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[21] See T. L. Johnson, *Serving with Calvin* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2015), 93-107.

[22] McKee, *John Calvin*, 56; cited from Calvin's "Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms," 96.

God living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, plunging into our bones and marrow, judging the thoughts and intentions of our hearts (Heb 4:12)? So are the Psalms. Do we grow by the pure milk of the word (1 Pt 2:1-2)? So do we grow by the pure milk of the Psalms. Is the Scripture given by inspiration of God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, equipping the people of God for every good work? So also are the Psalms.

Of course it matters not just *what* but *how* we sing. Because even Spirit-inspired words can be sung mechanically or thoughtlessly, the Psalms are concerned that we sing not by rote or mindlessly. We are to sing to God with the "whole heart" (repeated nine times in the Psalter).

> *I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise* (Ps 138:1; cf 9:1; 86:12; 111:1; 119:2, 10, 34, 69, 145).

Our "whole heart" and even our "whole being" is to be engaged:

> *Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.* (Ps 16:9)

God is not pleased with a people who honor Him with their lips, with words only, while their hearts are "far from me," as God first said through the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus repeated (Is 29:13; Mk 7:6, 7) "*All* that is within me" is "to bless his holy name" (103:1).

When the marriage of inspired words and appropriate tunes is right, the Psalms become a powerful tool of sanctification and growth for the believer. "Further than David's psalms we may go,"

says Henry, "but we *need* not, for hymns and spiritual songs."[23]

Comprehensive themes

The third reason for a canonical songbook is to provide songs that are suited to the whole range of human experiences and emotions. As we saw in our survey of the psalm-genres, there are Psalms for every circumstance, every mood, and the whole range of human emotions. Its themes are comprehensive. Robert Godfrey (b. 1946) tells the story of speaking at a Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) conference. The "Covenanters" (as they are commonly known) are an exclusively Psalm-singing denomination. During the question and answer time he asked, "What would you sing at a wedding?" The assembly spontaneously began to sing Psalm 128:

> [1]Blessed the man that fears Jehovah
> And that walketh in His ways;
> [2]Thou shalt eat of thy hands' labor
> And be prospered all thy days.
> [3]Like a vine with fruit abounding
> In thy house thy wife is found,
> And like olive plants thy children,
> Compassing thy table round.
> (*Trinity Psalter*)

There are Psalms suited to the spectrum of human occasions from weddings to funerals, and the whole spectrum of accompanying emotions. The Psalms teach us to respond to all manner of circumstances with singing. "Where do we find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving?" Luther asks. Again, "Where do we find deeper, more miserable, more pitiful words of sorrow than in the psalms of lamentation?"[24] Luther continues:

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[23] Henry, *Exposition*, III:237.
[24] Cited in *RCS*, *OT*, VII:2; from Luther's *Preface to the Psalms* (1545).

> Everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in it psalms and words that fit his situation – they fit so precisely, it is as if they were placed there just for his sake, so he himself could not put it any better, nor could he find or wish for anything better…[25]

This is to say that the Psalms are *human* in a way that few modern hymns dare to be. They are *real*. The whole body of Christian doctrine and experience is to be found in the Psalter. It is virtually a "little Bible," as we've seen Luther call the Psalter, even "an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book…"[26] Building on the comments of Calvin and the ancient fathers, the Puritan commentator John Trapp commends the Psalms as

> The soul's anatomy, the law's epitome, the gospel's index, the garden of the Scriptures, a sweet field and rosary of promises, precepts, predictions, soliloquys, etc.; the very heart and soul of God, the tongue and pen of David, a man after God's own heart.[27]

Songs are constantly on our lips because of what we have experienced of the mercies of God. Only the unbelieving have no cause for singing. Isaac Watts in his hymn "Come, We that Love the Lord" has us sing,

> Let those refuse to sing
> That never knew our God;
> But children of the heav'nly King
> May speak their joys abroad. [28]

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[25] Cited in *RCS*, *OT*, VII: 2; from Luther's *Preface to the Psalms* (1545).
[26] Cited in *RCS*, *OT*, VII:2; from Luther's *Preface to the Psalms* (1545); See same language in Rudolf Gwalther (1519-1586), successor to Zwingli and Bullinger in Zurich in *RCS*, *NT*, VII:2-3.
[27] John Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition on the Old and New Testaments*, Vols. 1-5 (1656, 1865-1868; Eureka, California: Tanski Publications, 1997), 2:456.
[28] Watts, "Come, We That Love the Lord," *Trinity Hymnal,* # 700, stanza 2.

The three-fold composition of music as we know it, consisting of melody, harmony, and rhythm, is almost entirely a creation of the Christian church. Western music is a product of Christendom. Worldlings may not sing. They may go to concerts and watch others sing. They may perhaps even hum along. Christians cannot but sing, and sing in response to the whole range of human experiences.

Laments

Perhaps life is sad. Life has taken a dark turn. Job says God gives us "songs in the night" (Job 35:10). When the "dark night of the soul" descends upon us, scores of Psalms are available to us to express our sorrow.

Our culture, even today's church, seems primarily to associate singing with happy times: athletic events, concerts, wedding receptions, and parties of all sorts. Even in the church there are many who cannot abide minor keys. Happy themes with happy tunes dominate our song selections. Anything slow and mournful is labeled a "funeral dirge." The problem with this mindset is life itself. Life in a fallen world, even for the Christian, is not an unbroken story of happy events. One of the most beloved gospel songs, "At the Cross," concludes its refrain with this phrase: "and now I am happy all the day." Is that truly the case? To what expectations do those lyrics give rise? Worse is the scripture-song from the 1970's:

> "Happy, happy, happy, happy;
> Happy is the people whose God is the Lord. (2X)
> Where does this happy feeling come from? (2X)
> This happy feeling comes from Jesus,
> Every day He more than pleases,
> That's where this happy feeling comes from."

Sensitive souls who struggle with sin, who are fully engaged in the fight of faith may well conclude from a song like that they are not Christians at all. Such songs are fundamentally dishonest and

misleading. They leave no space for the cry, "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:24). The Apostle Paul said he served "in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor 11:27). He said, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8, 9). "Afflicted," "crushed," "perplexed," "persecuted," "struck down" is not "happy all the day." The psalms accommodate and give voice to the full range of our emotions.

At a particularly low point in my life I sang Psalm 77, that darkest of Psalms lest one (the 88th), over and over for days on end:

> [1]With supplicating cry to God
> My voice shall lifted be;
> Yes, unto God I lift my voice,
> And He will answer me.
> [2]Through all the day I sought the Lord,
> When troubles on me pressed;
> Through all the night I stretched my hands;
> My soul refused to rest.

I sang it to the tune of *Myra*, which I later learned I mis-sung. No matter, those words with that tune ministered deeply to my soul. Life, even for Christians, is essentially tragic. We all get sick and die. Christ has removed the sting of death with the hope of heaven and eternal life, yet it still is saturated with grief (1 Cor 15:55-57; 1 Thess 4:13). There is much in life that disturbs and perplexes us. There is much in God and His dealings that confuses and even dismays us. Did Jesus not turn to the Psalms on the cross? Did He not in the depths of darkness cry out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" using the words of Ps 22:1? Did He not use the words of Psalm 31 as He uttered His last breath saying, "Into your hand I commit my spirit (Ps 31:5)? Many believers will arrive at services on Sunday broken and downcast by the events of the week. Their souls are soothed when psalms are sung which

give voice to their grief, with words and tunes suited to their confusion and sorrow.

Rejoicing
At the other end of the spectrum, the Psalms also are a vehicle by which to express our joy. David takes us from a time of despair to restoration.

> *[2] He drew me up from the pit of destruction,*
> *out of the miry bog,*
> *and set my feet upon a rock,*
> *making my steps secure.*
> *[3] He put a new song in my mouth,*
> *a song of praise to our God.*
> *Many will see and fear,*
> *and put their trust in the LORD.* (Ps 40:2-3)

He was in "the pit of destruction." Believers at times find themselves there. He was rescued from the "miry bog." He went from instability and insecurity to standing upon a rock, his "steps secure." This is not all. "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God." This is what He does. He saves us, giving us a reason to sing and a song with which to sing of our deliverance.

Repeatedly, the psalmist speaks of the "new song" that he now sings (Pss 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; see also Rev. 14:3). Whether this indicates a new composition or one new to him, singing "the Lord's songs" (as they're called in Psalm 137:4) is a delight to God's people. When granted a vision of the redeemed in heaven, we read that "they were singing a new song" (Rev 14:3). When we see the completion of our redemption in Christ, its fullness and richness, the sight will lead to song, a new song in light of the new, deeper understanding. Fresh insight will beg for fresh expression, as the redeemed learn the songs of heaven. Heaven is a happy, joyful place. One of these "new" songs is even recorded for us:

> [9] *"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,* [10] *and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."* (Rev 5:9, 10; cf. 4:8, 11; 5:13; 11:17-18; 19:1-3, 5-8; and especially 5:9; 14:3; 15:3-4)

The Psalms lead us to sing in every situation and in every sort of mood. Happy? Sing psalms. Sad? Sing laments. Fearful? Confused? Questioning? Express it with song. Joyful? Hopeful? Grateful? Let melodies resound. There is a song for every occasion and every emotion. Again, they are, says Calvin, "an anatomy of all parts of the soul. There is not an emotion of which one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."[29] Here, he says, "The Holy Spirit has drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."[30]

Centuries later C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) put it this way in his delightful devotional book, *Morning and Evening*:

> David knew the trials of all ranks and conditions of men. Kings have their troubles, and David wore a crown: the peasant has his cares, and David handled a shepherd's crook: the wanderer has many hardships, and David abode in the caves of Engedi: the captain has his difficulties, and David found the sons of Zeruiah too hard for him. The psalmist was also tried in his friends, his counselor Ahithophel forsook him: "He that eateth bread

[29] McKee, *John Calvin*, 56; cited from Calvin's "Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms."
[30] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), xxxvii.

with me, hath lifted up his heel against me." His worst foes were they of his own household: his children were his greatest affliction. The temptations of poverty and wealth, of honor and reproach, of health and weakness, all tried their power upon him. He had temptations from without to disturb his peace, and from within to mar his joy. David no sooner escaped from one trial than he fell into another; no sooner emerged from one season of despondency and alarm, than he was again brought into the lowest depths, and all God's waves and billows rolled over him. It is probably from this cause that David's psalms are so universally the delight of experienced Christians. Whatever our frame of mind, whether ecstasy or depression, David has exactly described our emotions. He was an able master of the human heart, because he had been tutored in the best of all schools – the school of heartfelt, personal experience. As we are instructed in the same school, as we grow matured in grace and in years, we increasingly appreciate David's psalms, and find them to be "green pastures." My soul, let David's experience cheer and counsel you this day.[31]

[31] C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), Morning, August 20.